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# The Artistic Challenges of the Documentary Intent

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Traducteur : Simon Pleasance

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Bernhardt, Uwe. *Le Regard imparfait : réalité et distance en photographie*, Paris : L'Harmattan, 2001, (Champs visuels)

Lavoie, Vincent. *L'Instant-monument : du fait divers à l'humanitaire*, Montréal : Dazibao, 2001, (Les Etudes)

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*Le Parti pris du document : littérature, photographie, cinéma et architecture au XXe siècle*, Paris : Ed. du Seuil, 2001, (Communications, 71)

*Des Territoires en revue : 5/5*. Paris : Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, 2001

*L'Image, le monde*, Paris : Léo Scheer, n° 1 et n° 2, 2001

- 1 The current state of publishing offers the sociologist I am a line of thinking about the links between present-day art and the representation of the real, based around the notion of "document", which, it just so happens, acts as a bridge between the two. For all this, no clear definition emerges. The document is not an essence, but rather a vector permitting a shift from one space or status to another. Long defined as a material at the service of knowledge, the document is these days appreciated as a fragment of reality likely to fuel the process of artistic formulation. The route taken by the document thus leads from the primary, quasi-immediate stage involving a grasp of the real (photographic, cinematic, or sound recording) to stages of representation that are more worked out or deemed so to be by those who have the authority to make such judgements. In other words, all this reflection issues from the field of art and leads to it: it speaks to us about the document as it is seen by art.

- 2 Two issues rear their heads right away—Olivier Lugon instantly raises them in relation to the invention of the “documentary style” in the 1930s: On what conditions can the document (or what is considered as such by certain artists and art experts) be part of artistic production? What form of art is made with the document (or what is considered as such...)?
- 3 The five issues of the catalogue-magazine *Des territoires en revue*, the one which *Communications* devotes to the “involvement of the document”, as well as the two instalments of *L'image, le monde*, all are brimming with examples which help to shed light on certain mainsprings of this artistic alchemy.
- 4 First and foremost, we discover trajectories that are off-kilter in relation to the art arena, but which all lead to it: the trajectory of Joseph Roth from journalism to fictional literature; those of Walker Evans, from photography, and Andy Warhol, from advertising, to modern art; Frederick Wiseman’s path from law to documentary film.
- 5 These transversal careers carry out a threefold operation: criticism of the predominant practices in force in the original area of activity: journalism, topical and documentary photography, advertising, TV reports, etc; transfiguration of “simple documents” (or documents so perceived, anyway) into pieces of art; and a refusal, by the same token, of the grand airs and graces typical of traditional art, even in its contemporary forms.
- 6 For the notion of document can also be used to shore up an approach to art by way of its denial: what is more, many producers of documents, like Walker Evans, assert that they don’t want to do anything thereby, which doesn’t stop them from finding their spot therein. Actually, their documentary intent is in no way aimed at reforming the invasive and distorting economy of the media: its sights are set rather on wriggling out of there to grasp elsewhere the possibility of bringing a work that isn’t terribly marketable full circle. What was still rare in the 1930s has nowadays become more frequent: press photographers, for example, find in galleries or contemporary art museums new spaces in which to promote their pictures.
- 7 In this new setting, their “documents” are often passed off as being more real than they are. Their intrusion in the artificial world of shapes and forms tends to make us overlook the fact that the document is invariably a make-believe of the real, if only because it already offers up a representation of it. Film-makers—such as the Dardenne brothers, or Frederick Wiseman again—assume this share of artifice more evidently than photographers who, for their part, often try to illude us with the “transparency” of their pictures. Here, a radical critique comes in, to do with the beliefs that we project on to the document, along with its faithfulness to the real, and its literality. This is a critique which Uwe Bernhardt adopts in the matter of photography, often regarded as the document *par excellence* (and used as such), because it is imprinted with the real, whereas this metonymic link in no way authenticates the representation or depiction it offers of things. To this exercise in philosophical doubt we should append the historical study which, on its own, can restore to us all those artistic and intellectual interventions and guarantees which turn out to be necessary for any renewal of art by way of its apparent antinomy, the document. O. Lugon’s book offers us a remarkable dip into the period of the 1930s.
- 8 But the artistic effectiveness of the document is not solely a matter for authors making art by default. It culminates with works produced beyond the art arena—off-screen, as it

were-, then retrieved by this same arena as “crude” slivers of the real: Atget published by the Surrealists, Deligny incorporated in the *Des territoires* show.

- 9 The constant factor, in such instances, is that these visual productions can be theorized over by persons other than their authors. This applies even with Walker Evans, who was reintroduced in the 1960s by new discourses to do with artistic legitimization. And today, experts like Jean-François Chevrier still comment on his photographs one by one. Here we find a characteristic typical of the document: its passiveness in the face of authoritative discourses on forms. Atget out of excessive modesty, Deligny out of lack of interest, Evans possibly out of guile, all acquired a greater artistic aura by letting themselves be reinvented by art authorities.
- 10 The fact is, however, that neither Atget, nor Deligny, and even less so Evans, were cultural idiots. Each one of them even enjoyed many connections with leading lights in the world of arts and letters. But they set considerable store by asserting their creative outsiderhood, and all the more readily as this became an additional trump card when it came to recognition. Thus it is that certain non-authors see themselves being hallowed as artists. Likewise, the document often passes for art despite itself, thus giving free rein to artists and art experts to reinvent its formal wealth for us. In these conditions, the cult of the document serves its re-inventors, first and foremost. As for its producers, figures such as Atget and Deligny either don't give a damn, or they just stand by and let it happen. Once and for all, the “involvement of the document” is a discourse originating from certain authorities in the field of art. It is a discourse *on* the Other (the document taken as a form of representation that is radically different from art, just as its author is radically different from the artist), but rarely a movement *towards* the Other. Art does not go astray in this confrontation; on the contrary, it assigns to itself an aesthetic renewal by incorporating those fragments which still seem to it to be more real because they are without any claimed author.
- 11 It can nonetheless come to pass that the document or its author dig their heels in when it comes to being annexed by art. Gaston Chaissac didn't let himself be instrumentalized by Dubuffet under the banner of *Art “brut”*. Joseph Deligny cannot be scaled down in the way in which the Ecole nationale supérieure des beaux-arts nowadays promotes his pictures. And Marc Pataut doesn't seem quite capable of coming to terms with the artist figure he has finally constructed for himself by fleeing sculpture for photography. Here, as in other less well-known cases, a posture and certain images arise which cannot be reduced to art.